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STUDENT NEWSPAPER WORK¹

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Miss Hinkley of North Dakota has described in a previous number of the *English Journal*² the admirable experiment her Dakota students made in writing for their town paper. It may be interesting to her and to others to know what a Cook County school has done in a similar line.

In our new high school, complete in every other detail, we needed interior decoration. The walls of our long corridors and of our new classrooms were bare. The parents would in time meet this need as they had met every other need, but it seemed to me that the moment had come for the students to do their part, experience elsewhere having convinced me that the oft-heard remark, "The more students can do for their school, the more they will love and respect it," is no empty adage. We had had a series of themes in one class on what our school needed. "How Shall We Raise the Necessary Funds?" was the subject of a set of unusually interesting articles in another class. Of all the suggestions made, the most practical one was by a reader of the *Chicago Tribune*, who proposed that the students try for the dollar prizes offered by that paper for the best articles on such topics as "My Most Exciting Moment," "My Most Embarrassing Moment," etc. This seemed good as far as it went, but I wanted it to go farther.

At that time I was reporting school items for one of the North Shore papers, the *Lake Shore News*, published in one of the villages of the township and circulating more or less widely along the whole North Shore. "Why not," I said to the editor, "offer prizes yourself to the New Trier students? I venture to say you'll increase your circulation; at any rate you will give an interesting

¹ A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, Illinois, November 26, 1915.

² "Motiving English Composition," *English Journal*, IV (April, 1915), 266.

page to the parents, who are looking for results now from the money they have expended for equipment."

"I will," he answered, "as long as the stories [I then and there learned that *story* is the technical newspaper name for a short article] are of community interest—no dry exercises on Dryden or pre-Shakesperean drama," he added with a laugh, "something readable, human. Oh, yes, and don't hand in everything you've got; pick out the ten best or so." And thus the plan was made.

By agreement of the English instructors, ten themes of three hundred words each were submitted to the paper twice a month, the first date being reserved for the Freshmen and Sophomores, the second for the Juniors and Seniors. Each instructor sent to a committee of the faculty the three or four themes written by her students that week which she considered the best, and from this total of fifteen or twenty, ten were chosen. A *Lake Shore News* committee selected the best three of these, giving a dollar as a first prize, seventy-five cents as a second, and fifty cents as a third. This money was saved till the end of the year, the amount earned by each room being devoted to a picture for that room. The English department chose the subjects for the different trials in advance and made them the basis of regular theme work, so that no time should be lost by reason of any extra demand. The program was posted on the school bulletin board, along with the prize-winning articles and the names of the winners, as they were made known.

As we began the contest in March, work appeared only seven times before school closed. Only three types of articles were attempted in these seven issues, each division of the school being given a chance to try each type once. The variety of individual subjects presented, however, was excellent. The program was as follows:

- March 5. Themes on various subjects, chiefly on those of community interest. Freshmen and Sophomores.
- March 26. The same subjects. Juniors and Seniors.
- April 9. Topics of community interest; also articles on "My Most Exciting Moment," "My Most Embarrassing Experience," and "How I Earned My First Money."

April 23, May 14. Verse, 12-30 lines.

May 28, June 1. Playlets or dialogue.

On June 18, the results of the experiment appeared in print. A total of \$15.75 had been earned, the money being distributed in sums of \$1.50, \$3.75, \$5.00, and \$5.50, to the four rooms entering the contest. The Freshman, Sophomore, and Junior classes received six prizes each; the Seniors, three. Nine students received honorable mention in the form of having their themes printed. The failure of the Senior class to receive more prizes was due, not to the inferiority of the work, but to the fact that so many of the best students were engaged in public contests of various kinds that they were either excused from the regular theme work or gave their best attention to their other activities; likewise to the fact that the upper classes had one trial less than those lower. The difference in degree of literary excellence between the upper and lower classes was on the whole surprisingly slight, the Freshman and Sophomore themes having a spontaneity and originality which was about an even match for the greater maturity of those by Juniors and Seniors.

As I read the various articles appearing in our paper I couldn't help comparing them with the prize productions in the newspaper which had given us our inspiration. The following is a fair type of the *Tribune* "story" coming under the general head, "My Most Embarrassing Moment Was When":¹

ASKED THE DOG'S PARDON

One evening I was coming out of a hall where I had attended a dance. I was greatly excited, as I had met there a man whose invitation I had refused on the plea of illness. That was embarrassing enough, but just as I reached the door a big dog popped out—he had been waiting outside for his master—and I bumped into him. "Oh, excuse me," I apologized to the dog, and the watching crowd roared.

Or, take this "Best Fish Story" appearing in the same number of the paper.

JUMPED INTO THE BOAT

While out fishing from a boat one time, my friend remarked that she wished I would catch a large fish, as she had never seen any larger than minnows. Just as she spoke the words a three and a one-half pound bass jumped out of

¹ *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1914.

the river right into her lap, which frightened her so she nearly fell into the water. Somehow we managed to stay in the boat, fish and all, and later enjoyed a good feast.

I do not wish to disparage these attempts, for I believe the effort made by the paper is right; certainly, as I said, it gave us our early inspiration; but after reading our selected themes I felt there were heights to be gained in the public columns of our news sheet. Compare, for instance, with the *Tribune* articles this one, written by a thirteen-year-old young gentleman, who confided to me after wading through the Evanston streets to join a party I was chaperoning, "I know what *I'm* going to write about for Monday."

THE WET SIDEWALKS OF EVANSTON¹

If I were going out walking with a young lady in the Spring, I should not go to Evanston. I should be forced to perform the Sir Walter Raleigh stunt with my new spring overcoat too many times to suit my father's bank account. Last year's flood of the Ohio was nothing compared to those sidewalks.

It might be all right if you had a pair of hip boots, but rubbers are as good as useless and worse, because when you come to an island your feet are still submerged in the water which occupies the spare room in your rubbers. I think the city of Evanston ought to furnish ferry-boats and also life preservers hung at frequent intervals along the river.

If the water on those sidewalks were transported to the Sahara, that desert would become the Garden of Eden. An ordinary aeroplane would be of no use in Evanston; it would have to be a hydro-aeroplane.

Anyone who knows "classic Evanston" in wet weather knows that the lad has voiced the citizen's plaint.

Again, take this paragraph from a theme by a Junior girl.

MY FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF WILMETTE²

But as for men. Didn't Wilmette have any? It was a manless town. Not a being of masculine gender over ten was to be seen on the street; not a man's voice was to be heard; even father declared his intention of leaving at once. Tears rose to my eyes at the thought of a manless existence. But we were somewhat comforted on being informed that they had merely emigrated to the city for the day and would return ere nightfall.

Or, here is the beginning of a second-prize story, this being, as one might infer, by a Freshman.

¹ *Lake Shore News*, March 5; article by James Logie.

² *Ibid.*, article by Gertrude Taber.

HOW I EARNED MY FIRST MONEY¹

Money! That was something that only older people could have. As children we were never allowed to have money. When it was given to us, it was chucked away in our bank, even before we saw it; and my desire was to carry money.

The dialogue presented was the least successful of the various types tried. The verse was better. Some lines on a burning trial of the North Shore, "In Gas Meter, with Apologies to Mother Goose," awakened no little interest. It began thus:

A NORTH SHORE EPISODE²

There was a man in our town
Who was not wondrous wise.
He tried to read by North Shore gas,
And ruined both his eyes.

And when he found his sight impaired,
He swore with might and main,
And then installed electric light
And got his sight again.

There was a maid in our good town,
Who was noted for her cakes.
She tried to cook with North Shore gas
And only got—headaches.

Some Freshman verse on "School Days" was realistic:³

Going to bed is bad enough,
But getting up is worse;
Hearing father's voice just now,
Is what inspired this verse.

My motorcar [which]

I couldn't well afford
It had an awful appetite and ate up all my hoard.

added to the many incidents about the Ford, and a humorous poem in which

Editor, now why this rews
To send young mortals after news?

brought a first prize to a Junior.

¹ *Lake Shore News*, April 9; article by Jesse Gathercoal.

² *Ibid.*, April 29, 1915; verse by Roy Holmes.

³ *Ibid.*, May 14; verse by Winifred Reinboth.

SOME NEWS¹

Oh, dear, I wish I knew some news,
 That would some interest infews
 Within the judge so he might uews
 My slanderous, bright, or kindly news.

.
 These crazy thoughts my brain confews,
 And I king's English do abews,
 Ah me, why am I such a gews?

With the different issues of the paper, the instructors of the department did not always, I confess, agree with the editor's choice of best articles, but remembering the dictum originally stated that only bright and lively news "would some interest infews," we were on the whole able to understand why a lyric on "Bob White" or "To a Bluebird" had to yield precedence to "The Woman and the Vote" or "The Real Reel."

With regard to the result of this experiment, this much is certain. We have four good pictures (framed out of school funds) among which are Whistler's "Carlyle," Gainsborough's "Mrs. Siddons," and Dickson's "Swift and Stella," which is very popular. We have, or we had while the contest continued, an exceedingly vivid interest in composition, shown in better quality of material and more accurate workmanship. We have even some gain in school spirit and altruism, for some of the students (those, we trust, whose money had been "chucked away" in the bank by the adults) thought they should have the proceeds themselves, but saw a new light when their fellow-students suggested worthier considerations.

What the community gained by seeing its own affairs treated by the young folks, I cannot wholly say, but it seems to me that there was some gain. The fire departments of the suburbs certainly received some ludicrous knocks from which they should have profited.

"To complete this wonderful outfit" [one student wrote of the equipment in a wealthy hamlet²] it also has a hand-ax and a dinner bell. The firemen consist of the police force, two able-bodied men. When they get tired of pushing or pulling this

¹ *Ibid.*, April 28; verse by Mary Gallagher.

² *Ibid.*, March 5; article by Elvin Sipes.

contrivance, one of them rings this bell. It has been known to have been rung twice in one block."

Moving pictures, the police force in the township, and the detestable car service of the Milwaukee Electric Road where, when "the conductor yells 'New Trier,' you are lifted bodily from your feet and shot forth as from a sling, only to stop against the hard surface of the station platform," were some of the subjects treated.

Copies of the paper were sometimes sent to the companies causing the grievance.

New Trier High School, like all schools, is a busy place, with constant incentives to competition with other schools; and because there were so many outside demands last year the experiment was not then continued. There is no reason, however—our friendly editor agreeing—why our press writing should not be continued another year, why we should not enlarge our scope, send in editorials on matters of state and national interest, letters of travel, courteous letters of complaint, if you will, verse of many kinds, and good jokes.

The day when the community as a whole turns out for the "last day of school" to hear the pupils perform is largely past, but the community still wishes to know what is the result of all the effort with theme paper and pens, and the newspaper furnishes this means. Moreover, our North Shore editor would say, and I believe the Dakota editor would also say, that he is getting an attractive feature for his paper at slight cost—a cost that is comparatively small even at two dollars and twenty-five cents a column. Then, too, the inspiration to a student of seeing his name and work in a paper of standing which he can send to his relatives is no small one. The mature writer may be content "to write one article a day for his grate fire"; the younger student wants more tangible and more speedy results, and he needs the inspiration of them. The average school paper cannot print, or at least should not be able to print, all the best themes in a year, nor can the instructor read all of a week's product in the composition hour, or even always post them.

As I peruse, if I can bother to peruse, "Coincidences I Have Known," "Were You Ever Nearly Drowned?" "What Feet

Secrets Have You?" "Would You Marry Your Mate Again?" ("Send your letters in care of Doris Blake"), I have a wider inspiration. Why not let our schools co-operate with our larger papers in filling the columns open to the public, not only in writing on subjects now prescribed, for these savor too much of the sentimental, sensational type, but in asking for other subjects and in ourselves setting some standards of style? The average student of today reads the newspaper more than he reads the good magazine. According to no less a critic than Dr. Canby, of Yale,¹ he gets good reading in the journalistic columns, excellent reading, of which no American need be ashamed. Let him also get good reading in the columns open to Americans at large; and if he can also feel that he is having a share in making these columns good, so much the better. We are doing something along this line in the Lake Forest College contests, especially in the letter-writing contest where, this past year, the friendly letters penned were actually sent to the persons addressed; but the Lake Forest contest reaches at most only the contestants and the delegates from schools near enough to come easily. We can do more.

America agrees with Europe that America must have a great criticism before it can have a great literature. As yet we have no great criticism, and no great literature, though in certain lines of fiction and in the journalistic field we undoubtedly surpass (to quote Dr. Canby again) our continental colleagues. We have done much in our public schools to produce both good themes and good criticism of them, but may we not have more universal standards, and wider knowledge of what our neighbors do? To my mind, this is perfectly feasible throughout the country by friendly co-operation with our news sheets, which are, after all, only larger editions of the early columns which the friendly Addison and the genial coffee-houses made prosperous.

¹ "Current Literature and the Colleges," *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1915.